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ABSTRACT

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism has applications to rhetoric and composition instruction. Dialogism, sometimes translated as intertextuality, is the term Bakhtin used to designate the relation of one utterance to other utterances. Dialogism is not dialogue in the usual sense of the word; it is the context which informs utterance, and without which utterance cannot exist. Thus, composing is never the business of the writer working alone, but always the result of his or her interaction with the world, and with its readers and subjects. Dialogism rejects the notion that writing can express an individual self, believing that what is expressed in discourse is culture, or values held by a particular culture. In terms of general composition instruction, dialogism forces individuals to reexamine their definitions of the elements of the rhetorical triangle (writer, subject, and audience), as well as the relationship of these elements to each other. Two advantages offered by dialogic thinking for composition instruction are: (1) by locating expression in society rather than in self, an enhanced appreciation of authorship as a community-based activity may result; and (2) by accepting flux as the natural order of things, and of the rhetorical situation, a true appreciation for the relentless change which underpins the composing process may be achieved, and thus those pedagogical strategies which emphasize openness, rather than closure, and which posit change as the norm can be embraced. (SR)

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Helen Rothschild Ewald

Mikhail Bakhtin and "Expressive Discourse"

Mikhail Bakhtin, who only a decade ago was but an obscure Russian critic, has enjoyed increasing popularity of late, not only as a literary critic but also as language theorist. Bakhtin's importance to literary criticism, for example, has been explored in such essays as Wayne C. Booth's "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," and his importance to language theory, in Caryl Emerson's "The Outer World and Inner Speech: Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and the Internalization of Language." However, less has been written about the possible application of Bakhtinian thought to rhetoric and, particularly, to composition instruction.

Of specific interest to us today is Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. I will now offer a brief definition of dialogism, before discussing its implications for expressive discourse as a category and for composition instruction in general.

What is dialogism?

Dialogism, sometimes translated as intertextuality, is the term Bakhtin used to designate the relation of one utterance to other utterances. Dialogism, then, is not dialogue in the usual sense of the word. It is the context which informs utterance. And for Bakhtin, utterance cannot exist without context. To quote from Bakhtin, "Every word gives off the scent of a profession, a genre, a current, a party, a particular work, a particular man, a generation, an era, a day, and an hour. Every word smells of the context and contexts in which it has lived its intense social life" (in Todorov, 56). Dialogism is these scents and smells. With its emphasis on context, dialogism attempts to dissolve traditional oppositions of the individual to society, of self to other, of "the specific utterance to the totality

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of language," and of "particular actions to the world of norms and conventions" (Morson xi). When a writer uses language, s/he necessarily engages or responds to past and present discourses. Composing is never the business of the writer working alone, but always the result of his or her interaction with the world, and more specifically, with the readers and the subjects which populate this world (see Bakhtin in Todorov, 43). In short, all writing is intensely sociohistorical, and, in this sense, is by nature collaborative.

What does dialogism say about "expressive discourse"?

Because it questions the dichotomy of self and other, dialogism can also be said to question the viability of a discourse which purportedly functions as a way for the individual writer to put personality to paper. And "expressive discourse," as it's usually defined, fulfills this function. In A Theory of Discourse, James L. Kinneavy includes journals, diaries, and prayer as examples of expressive discourse (61). Other forms, such as manifestos, contracts, myths, and religious credos, are also considered as expressive discourse. These social documents present or express socially held values and beliefs. Whether individually or socially exemplified, expressive discourse has been associated with the writer as individual creator. As a category, it is based on Western Humanist Tradition, which preserves the sovereign ego. This tradition enables the writer to declare, "I own meaning." As such, this tradition clearly underpins the notion that it is natural for a particular type of discourse to exist to facilitate individual self-expression. Moreover, this tradition also pervades our understanding of what writing itself is all about, that is, "an independent quest for purpose, and a projection of one's self" (see Kroll 183).

Bakhtin, however, would reject the notion that writing can express an "individual" self, in the traditional sense. Instead of saying "I own meaning," Bakhtin would say, "We own meaning." "Words and lingusitic forms do not belong to the individual," but to society (Todorov 44). Accordingly, there can be nothing independent in what the individual expresses. Moreover, while Bakhtin does believe discourse is expressive, he emphasizes that all discourse is a response, rather than an "independent" quest for self-articulation and understanding. What is expressed in discourse is not unique self-portraiture, indeed, a single voice can make itself heard "only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place" (Todorov x). What is expressed in discourse is culture, or values held by a particular culture.

Although Bakhtin's rejection of the writer as questing knight and--by extension--of expressive discourse as trusty steed, may be alien to Western Humanist thought, it, perhaps surprisingly, finds echoes in recent composition research. It is interesting to note, for example, that Linda Flower, known for her concern with individual composing processes, states in a 1989 article that we must abandon the romantic myth of the isolated creator when we are discussing the writing process. Flower argues for an interactive perspective which would account for the intermingling of individual and social influences which are present during **any** discourse act, whether that act be writing a personal letter or collaborating on a team report (282-311). If we are to embrace this idea that writing is collaborative rather than individual, it seems that we will either have to reconsider our understanding of expressive discourse, or we will have to abandon the category altogether.

What does dialogism have to say to composition instruction in general?

In terms of general composition instruction, dialogism forces us to reexamine the elements of the rhetorical triangle: writer, subject, and audience.

First, Bakhtin's thought has potential influence on how we define what it means to "author." For Bakhtin, the word, and the writing of the word, is a two-sided act, where meaning is created by both writer and reader. In this scheme, creativity is anonymous, because it is constituted not in the individual author but in the cultural system. At the same time, individual utterances enact differences present in society and are the way cultural values get shaped into expression. If we are to use Bakhtin in talking to our students about what it means to be a writer, then, we will have to abandon statements like, "When you write, you 'create ideas and words out of yourself'" (see Elbow 7). Instead, we will have to develop heuristics which will alert these students to the community implicit in their thinking and in their very selves.

Just as Bakhtin's thought requires an enhanced approach to authorship, so too it suggests a new perspective on subjects. Bakhtin believes that subjects "carry within themselves the traces of preceding usage" (see Todorov 63). In other words, subjects, like language and language users, exist in context. In fact, subjects are very much like authors. They are so much like authors that Bakhtin anthropomorphizes subjects in his analysis and calls them heroes. Probing a subject during the writing process, then, would entail paying attention to its "social life." For example, during brainstorming we might be sure to ask such questions as: "How has

this subject been previously handled in oral and written discourse?" and "How does this subject implicate us as authors and readers?"

Of course, Bakhtin's thought places new emphasis on audience, because the reader, like the writer, authors meaning. Actually, Bakhtin's view of the reader as creator nicely complements reading researchers' image of the constructing reader. Reading theorists have found that what a reader brings to a text is as important as, if not more important than, what the text itself presents (Goetz and Armbruster 202). Moreover, readers commonly alter text-presented entries to "produce a better match" with their own world-knowledge (de Beaugrande 232). It is not so strange, then, that Bakhtin should find the reader's role in creating meaning to be crucial. The reader consummates the discourse act. Therefore, there really is no such thing as too much attention to audience, as some Western Humanists might have us believe. Writers need to develop a host of strategies to explore and enlist this potent resource throughout the composing process.

But while dialogism enhances our understanding of author, subject, and purpose, it also requires us to reexamine these elements as they relate to each other. After all, dialogism as "intertextuality" is concerned with interaction.

So it seems that just when we have acclimatized ourselves to a richer representation of author, subject, and reader, Bakhtin puts the whole rhetorical triangle into motion with his emphasis on past history and current context. Writing entails not so much the process of analyzing the elements of the rhetorical triangle as it does "triangulating" authors, subjects, and readers which are themselves in a constant state of flux. It should come as no surprise that Bakhtin envisions the rhetorical triangle as a circle, whirling in time and space.

We have been traditionally uncomfortable with moving targets of the kind Bakhtin sets for us here. Although we have been intrigued by such concepts as Robert Roth's evolving audience, we have usually preferred our rhetorical elements to stay put. For example, when adopting Kenneth Burke's Pentad, we have commonly taken its Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose and stripped them of their ratios, which were originally designed to address issues of relation, in much the same way as dialogism concerns itself with relation. Indeed, both Burke and Bakhtin see "the identity of a thing [an author, a subject, an audience] not as a lonely isolate [distinct] from all other categories but as a contrasting variable of all other categories which might, under different conditions, fill the same position in existence" (Clark and Holquist 7). Bakhtin's dialogism forces us the consider the rhetorical situation as a dynamic process. To "do Bakhtin," therefore, we will have to redo Burke, or more accurately, undo our static interpretation of Burke's Pentad and of similar heuristic devices.

What are the advantages of dialogic thinking to composition instruction?

Although there are many possible advantages of dialogic thinking to composition instruction, I'd like to suggest just two:

1. By locating expression in society rather than in self, we allign ourselves with Vygotsky and a number of developmental experts (these, incidently, came to include Piaget) who maintain that our sense of self relies on social intercourse. In other words, it is audience and situation which actualizes inner speech. With this social emphasis, we may come to an understanding of "expression" as it transcends the isolated ego and of individual utterance as it relates to other utterance. In so doing, we may come to an enhanced appreciation of authorship as a community-based activity.

2. By accepting flux as the natural order of things, and more specifically, of the rhetorical situation, we may well achieve true appreciation for the relentless change which underpins the composing process. As a result, we might actually embrace those pedagogical strategies which emphasize openness, rather than closure, and which posit change as the norm. In other words, we might eagerly seek to restore the ratios to Burke's Pentad, even though they admitedly complicate things both for us and for our students.

To be sure, resisting closure is difficult, especially at this point in giving a paper at a national conference. However, today at least I'll be Bakhtinian enough to resist making a "glorious" closing statement and instead will turn to my fellow panel members, who will surely contribute other insights into the importance of Bakhtin's thought to composition instruction.

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